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**Testimony before the Transportation Committee in support of SB-425,  
an act concerning the improvement of the Norwalk/Danbury train line**

**Tuesday, February 24, 2009**

**1:00 PM, Room 2E, LOB**

Senator DeFronzo, Representative Guerrera, distinguished members of the Transportation Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of proposed SB-425, an act concerning the improvement of the Norwalk/Danbury train line.

My name is Gail Lavielle. I am a Wilton resident and a former frequent commuter. I am also a member of the Connecticut Public Transportation Commission. I am not testifying today on behalf of the Commission, but I will note that its Annual Report this year includes a strong recommendation for continued progress on improving this branch line.

The Norwalk/Danbury branch is a lifeline for one of western Connecticut's busiest transportation corridors. It has a wonderful historic past, dating back more than 150 years. The problem is that, until recently, it was still living in it.

Over the last few months, however, a sweeping change in focus at the state level has brought a series of new developments that have augured well for the branch line's advancement and the communities that depend on it. Service was increased with two new midday trains, Wilton's two stations received new amenities, and, most important, initial funding was authorized for a new centralized traffic control signaling system.

This system is the absolute prerequisite to more frequent service, which, I believe, is the most pressing urgency. Weekday service on the Norwalk/Danbury branch line still consists of only 11 round trips per day. By contrast, there are 20 round trips on the New Canaan branch. With this service, some commuters can't get to work early enough. Others can get to work, but there is no train at a suitable hour to get them back to the station where they parked.

The result is that many commuters from Wilton and Ridgefield drive to mainline stations like Norwalk, Westport, and Stamford. This means overcrowded parking at those stations, and more congestion and pollution on both the north-south and the east-west roads. For many commuters from farther north, in Redding, Bethel, and Danbury, making this kind of two-stage trip every day is just not feasible, and they may have almost no choice but to drive all the way to their final destinations.

Even so, the line still carries more than 700,000 passengers per year, according to the Transportation Strategy Board's January 2007 report. More frequent service could raise that number substantially.

The new signaling system, scheduled for installation within three years, will make more frequent service possible. It is urgent to complete it. But we can't stop there. The DOT's feasibility study on further improvements must move ahead. An important next step under evaluation is re-electrification of the line, which could mean more through trains and reduced travel times. And then there is the extension of service to New Milford, which could increase the line's ridership by a third. Along the way, we must look, as well, at adding important amenities like parking and ticket machines, to the existing stations on the line.

We are all aware of the budget issues we're facing, and of the need for tough choices. In this context, I would argue that it is more important than ever to sustain the momentum we now have. Western Connecticut is one of our state's key economic engines, and mass transit is necessary to keep it going. Businesses can't run and families can't survive if people can't get to work. Connecticut needs its people in this part of the state to stay in Connecticut and to contribute to its economy. But they must have conditions that allow them to thrive: efficient mass transit, less congested roadways, and property values that are enhanced by easy access to major metropolitan areas.

So I ask you respectfully, for Wilton, for Ridgefield, for Redding, for Bethel, and for Danbury and the towns beyond, as well as for Norwalk, Westport, Stamford, and all their mainline neighbors – and for the economic future of our state – to create the conditions for speedy progress on the improvement of the Norwalk/Danbury branch line, and to enable it to provide the kind of convenient, frequent, and reliable mass transit service that the people and businesses of western Connecticut have awaited, and expected, for so long. Thank you.

Gail Lavielle  
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Member, Connecticut Public Transportation Commission